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Citation for published version:
Geddes, M 2023, *Good Evidence: How do select committees use evidence to support their work?*
Edinburgh.

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Good Evidence

How do select committees use evidence to support their work?

Findings from a Parliamentary Academic Fellowship Scheme project

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About the author

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

This report examines the role and use of evidence by MPs and officials in supporting select committees, based on a 12-month Parliamentary Academic Fellowship between August 2021 and July 2022 that draws on 50 interviews with MPs and officials. The report summarises key findings relevant for the Select Committee Team (SCT), and provides suggestions to enhance evidence use by committees. The report has 11 sections, which examine interpretations of evidence (Section 2), the processes used to gather evidence (Sections 3-5), trends and challenges (Sections 6-10), and a concluding section with cross-cutting themes and suggestions for improvements (Section 11).

In this summary, I give a synopsis in terms of (i) how evidence is gathered and used; (ii) implications for understanding 'good' evidence; and, (iii) challenges for evidence use.

Understanding evidence-gathering and evidence use

Interviewees generally thought of 'evidence' in a parliamentary sense, i.e. written and oral evidence (Section 2). This means almost anything formally submitted and eligible can 'count' as evidence. Specifically regarding the formal processes:

- **Written evidence** is seen as the main source of information. Aside from content, written evidence is evaluated by officials according to: (i) the source, to understand likely types of knowledge and to identify credibility; (ii) motivation for submitting evidence; (iii) the political/policy value of a submission. MPs' engagement is limited, often via briefing papers.
- **Oral evidence** is invite-only and where MPs directly engage with different types of knowledge and information. It can play an informational role or to probe claims made elsewhere. Oral evidence, given high member engagement, is usually the preferred source of evidence for reports, even if written evidence identifies the main issues in a policy area.

Increasingly, committees are also innovating with 'informal' activities. Some of these have been used for a long time, including committee visits and private roundtables; others have become more frequent in recent years, including social media, surveys and focus groups.

Three trends were also identified (Section 6, Section 7, Section 10):

- A **growing role for lived experience** and public opinion as a form of evidence in formal and informal evidence-gathering;
- An **emphasis on diversity**, not just in terms of political viewpoints (a long-standing tradition) but of witnesses' personal characteristics; and,
- The **role of select committees is changing**, not only to provide scrutiny of government policy, but also as vehicles for public participation and policy learning.

What does 'good' evidence use look like?

One key aim of this project was to identify what effective evidence use looks like. Based on my fellowship, I have identified four principles:

1. Evidence needs to be **appropriate** for the inquiry, i.e. the committee needs to be clear about the purpose of gathering evidence and using it.
2. Evidence needs to be gathered from a **diversity** of sources – not just in terms of political views, but also personal characteristics and geographical coverage across the UK.
3. Evidence needs to be systematically **analysed** and given the time to do so, i.e. ensuring there is

adequate resource to reflect on evidence.
4. Evidence needs to be **engaging** for committee members, i.e. evidence-gathering cannot become a staff-only exercise but needs to be led by MPs.

On the basis of these principles, the SCT could identify specific quantitative or qualitative measures to show effective use of evidence to support effective scrutiny.

Challenges for evidence use

Throughout interviews, several challenges were raised, including:
- In general, there is **growth in the volumes of evidence**. In part, this is due to a growing role for lived experience and public opinion in written evidence, which has caused pressures on committee teams;
- Sometimes it is not clear **what principles underpin the value of 'lived experience'**, or how to best integrate it into existing committee processes and inquiries, creating pressures on the process, on staff, and on public expectations that cannot necessarily be met;
- There is a **tension in promoting diversity of witnesses** in that it is seen as a normative good for some, but also difficult to achieve without adequate resources and agreement between MPs on the priority of this issue;
- Their evolving role means that **committees are being asked to fulfil more tasks**, including public engagement and diversity goals, putting further pressure on teams and evidence process;
- The **process for gathering evidence has remained largely the same** despite innovations, improved technological advances, and changing practices, which some believed needs to be addressed given new pressures, notably increased volume and new kinds of evidence;
- **Time pressures are intense and constant** for many staff, which is partly the result of the above trends but also a belief that committees are under-resourced, by both MPs and officials; and,
- The skillset and commitment of officials was praised, but, according to some officials, there is **perceived lack of training** around innovations of evidence-gathering and using quantitative data.

To overcome some of these barriers, interviewees made suggestions summarised in Section 11 (see p.37) but most importantly revolve around greater resource.

I close the report with a more provocative suggestion to re-frame evidence-gathering in terms of 'evidence pillars':
- **Pillar 1: submissions of information/evidence** (formerly written evidence and to include other formats than Word or PDF documents)
- **Pillar 2: committee hearings** (a plainer form of language from oral evidence but otherwise unchanged)
- **Pillar 3: consultation and engagement** (given the same status as other forms of evidence but published as a summary rather than submissions/data in full).

I hope to be of further assistance to the Select Committee Team and be able to conduct further research in this area.

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January 2023

Contents

1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to examine the role and use of evidence by MPs and officials in supporting parliamentary work, specifically in a select committee context. This is based on research from a 12-month Parliamentary Academic Fellowship between August 2021 and July 2022.[1]

1.1. Fellowship aims

My fellowship complements emerging academic and policy research on the relationship between science, knowledge and parliaments by focusing on everyday practices of evidence use by committees. While it does not constitute a formal review of evidence-gathering processes, I offer several suggestions for enhancing evidence use for the Select Committee Team (SCT). I was guided by two aims:

1. To get a more detailed, academic understanding of how parliaments make use of evidence in committee contexts; and,
2. To support the Select Committee Team, where appropriate, to enhance their support to select committees for good scrutiny.

This report focuses on the second aim (with further academic outputs to follow). It offers a summary of key issues relevant to the evidence-gathering process, specifically the views of MPs and officials.

1.2. What do we already know?

The UK Parliament has been at the forefront to advance debate on evidence use. The Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST) published a landmark report in 2017, which offered the first systematic review of Parliament's use of research evidence. It found that 'research evidence' is defined broadly and a variety of types of knowledge are seen as valuable (Kenny et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the House of Commons Liaison Committee (2019) identified mechanisms to support more diverse ways to bring research evidence into Parliament through a comprehensive report on committee effectiveness, which has since driven innovations (e.g. Areas of Research Interest). Other organisations have also identified untapped potential, e.g. for academics to give oral evidence (Fawcett, 2021).

Academic research on the role of 'evidence' in politics and policy has also noticeably grown in the last 30 years (Boaz et al., 2019), showing the complex and nuanced relationships between science, knowledge and policy-making, including in parliamentary settings (Crewe, 2017). With respect to select committees, research has found that committees act as 'boundary' actors between science and non-science (Turnpenny et al., 2012); that diversity is an important principle but also constrained by traditional inquiry processes (Beswick and Elstub, 2019); and that witnesses largely find the process to be rewarding with minimal grandstanding (LSE GV314 Group, 2020).[2]

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1 The original aims of this project had been to examine the effectiveness of evidence use by the Environmental Audit Committee, using a combination of documentary analysis and participant observation, supplemented by a small selection of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The original research broadened out for two reasons. First, physical restrictions from Covid-19 meant practical limitations on observation and on availability of participants. Second, limited access to spaces for observation of other committees, and concern over the use of observation, meant that I believed it was more appropriate to use interviews as a way to gather information, which were more wide-ranging about evidence-gathering.

2 In my own previous research, I have examined the diversity of oral witnesses (Geddes, 2018), subsequently used in The Good Parliament report (Childs, 2016); explored knowledge requirements within the UK Parliament (Geddes et al., 2018); undertook a review of knowledge exchange strategies of the UK legislatures (Beswick and Geddes, 2020); and examined how MPs and officials interpret the idea of 'evidence' (Geddes, 2021).

1.3. Methodology and data

This project is based on a Parliamentary Academic Fellowship with the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) between August 2021 and July 2022. For this report, I draw on interview data with MPs and officials (see Table 1.1, below). I inductively coded all interviews based on recurring themes. Codes were subsequently revised and merged once all transcripts had been analysed. This report is structured around updated codes that are most relevant for the SCT. Please see Appendix A (p.43) for a more detailed methods summary.

	Invitations	Interviews
MPs	**95 (of which, 14 chairs)**	**26 (of which, 8 chairs)**
Labour	32	13
Conservative	54	10
Third parties	9	3
Officials	**26**	**24**
Clerks and management	17	15
Specialists and inquiry managers	9	9
Total	**121**	**50**

2. Defining evidence: what counts?

In this section, I summarise interview participants' views of the term 'evidence' in select committee scrutiny. I begin with a discussion of 'what counts' because it sets the parameters for discussion, and indicates what is included and excluded from considerations for decision-making.

2.1. The term 'evidence' in a parliamentary context

When asked, one senior official's response was: 'In the most basic sense, what is evidence? It's what the committee decides to report to the House, which is problematic, but that is the system' (Interview with Official 3). This was a common response; almost all interviewees would connect it to the processes used by select committees to gather information. For example:

> I would interpret the term, "evidence", as being mainly oral and written evidence that is specific to the committee and that is evidence that is designed solely for the committee's terms of reference (Interview with Official 18).

> Because I've been around for so long, when someone says to me, "evidence", I hear it in a parliamentary sense. And when I say, "parliamentary sense", I mean written and oral evidence that committees get as part of formal parliamentary proceedings (Interview with Official 11).

Only formal evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege, which means that evidence formally published is protected from being used in court (Interview with Official 10, Interview with Official 20). As a result, officials are careful about what can be labelled as 'evidence':

> You've got this distinction that is very important to clerks, for good reason, between formal evidence, which is a proceeding in Parliament, and informal activity, which is not a proceeding in Parliament. And that's one of those distinctions that nine times out of ten doesn't matter at all, but when it matters, it matters a lot […] it's always at the back of your mind, "is this evidence? Is this something that's protected by privilege? If they say something defamatory, could they be sued?" (Interview with Official 9).

The specific meaning of 'evidence' in a parliamentary context has two consequences. First, it means that the system distinguishes between – as the above interview put it – formal evidence and 'informal activity'. Both still inform committee work, but there is a lingering question about whether formal evidence has a 'higher' status given that this is the presumed basis for committee reports. Second, it means that the system is perceived to be very open and with inbuilt flexibility. One interviewee explains that the system 'can make room for a lot of different approaches to gathering evidence' (Interview with Official 3). The drawback from this is that it can also mean 'evidence can be someone's opinion on something' (Interview with Official 4) or, more negatively, 'I would still kind of think of written and oral evidence as anecdotes or opinion rather than evidence' (with the latter use of the same word referring to 'original sources of research […] or authoritative sources or sort of summarising research, for example') (Interview with Official 12).

One interviewee noted that the distinction between formal and informal is 'unhelpful' (Interview with Official 20). Another was more blunt, calling the system 'weird' and said:

> I think it's a big mess … it's essentially a mess, but one that's worth unpicking, because it tells us a lot about how we value different kinds of information, I think (Interview with Official 11).

The concern among some officials stems from the way that the language of 'evidence' can mask lots of different types of information; it does not discriminate between a piece of peer-reviewed research undertaken by a professor from a Russell Group university and a short personal opinion from a member of the public with no expertise on the issue. While in practice these would be treated very differently, the terminology does not allow for an explicit distinction.

Does this matter? It does insofar as it can be a 'turn off' for some people to get involved (Interview with Official 20; Interview with Official 11) or can be misleading if there is a mis-interpretation that the process can be compared to a court of law, given the language similarities (Interview with Official 5). For this reason, the Liaison Committee (2019, paras 228–9) recommended a change of terminology, which has been informally adopted by officials and through the UK Parliament website (Interview with Official 20). Nevertheless, perhaps there is room for making the language simpler, particularly to help clarify what evidence can be included.

2.2. Types of evidence

Several interviewees explained that the type of information and evidence used in committee work depended on the inquiry (Interview with Official 20), which means that it is hard to establish a general picture based solely on interviews. In previous quantitative research (Geddes, 2018), I found the following with respect to oral evidence:[3]
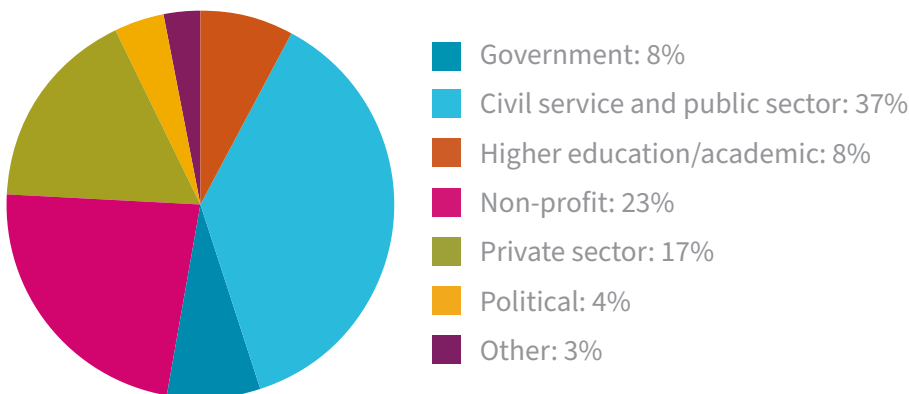
Further research is required to understand the wider evidence landscape (e.g. regarding written evidence).

Overall, interviewees reinforced the importance of understanding the government position (hence the high number of government and civil service witnesses) as a basis for scrutiny (Interview with Official 10). As a result, several also mentioned the importance of access to government data (Interview with Official 12; Interview with Official 19). Others mentioned that in-house research is often an important starting point for scoping notes, terms of reference and understanding the broad contours of debates within a policy area (e.g. Interview with Official 15; Interview with Official 10).

Section 2 demonstrates that the term 'evidence' has a specific meaning in a parliamentary setting but that evidence is otherwise considered openly and flexibly. To better understand how evidence is gathered and analysed, I will now turn to the processes involved.

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3   These categories have been slightly amended from the published article.

3. Gathering and analysing evidence

In this section, I focus on the two formal processes on which committee work is based, written and oral evidence.

3.1. Written evidence

Written evidence is facilitated through an open call for evidence; that is, anybody can submit a piece of writing through the Parliament website after the terms of reference for the relevant inquiry has been published.

Written evidence plays at least two functions. First, it acts as the main source of information for select committees that can be officially reported, and can identify key points of debate (Interview with Official 7). As one official put it, it's 'an opportunity to see where the balance of opinion lies, see what different groups think, individuals as well as organisations' (Interview with Official 14). Second, written evidence acts as 'bedrock' (Interview with Official 2; Interview with Official 21) for committee hearings and 'should be your primary source of information for producing [the] brief' for hearings (Interview with Official 4). In short, written evidence shapes the contours of the remainder of the process, particularly oral evidence.

Although written evidence is the first and foundational part of the evidence-gathering process, it plays a limited *direct* role for MPs. The consensus from interviews is that MPs would 'cherry pick' (Interview with MP 11) or 'skim through' (Interview with MP 7) written evidence, particularly to see relevance to their constituency or region (Interview with MP 8). Chairs would engage with it more often because of their greater responsibility for the committee and its work (Interview with MP 10; Interview with MP 16). The reason for the lack of attention is time pressure (Interview with MP 15; Interview with MP 20). Some MPs acknowledged that written evidence 'doesn't get the attention that it deserves' (Interview with MP 6), with another saying that it is likely to be 'more valuable but it's in the nature of the time available that we tend to rely more heavily on the oral evidence' (Interview with MP 13). An additional, related pressure is the quantity of evidence (see below), which would make it difficult for MPs to examine evidence in any systematic manner (Interview with MP 21). Instead, officials and MPs agreed that it is a fair division of labour that MPs do not directly look at much of the written evidence unless highlighted by staff as useful for the inquiry, almost exclusively through briefing papers (Interview with Official 10; Interview with Official 18).

How do officials analyse and evaluate written evidence? Many interviewees mentioned that NVivo has become an important digital tool (especially since the pandemic) to allow staff to analyse data (e.g. Interview with Official 1; Interview with Official 15; Interview with Official 6; Interview with Official 19; Interview with Official 21). Many described the process of looking at written evidence in terms of identifying key codes and themes (irrespective of whether they used NVivo):

> It's kind of a potted discourse analysis, I think, we probably all do for written evidence, just like analysing key themes, reoccurring themes, reoccurring recommendations or themes of recommendations (Interview with Official 10).

This interviewee also points out a key difference between academic research and select committee analysis: 'by analysis of information, we really mean condense, synthesise, identify the key issues' (Interview with Official 10). In other words, the focus is on policy and to find policy solutions (Interview with Official 11);

it is not an academic or peer review process for research, but a political process (Interview with Official 6; Interview with Official 4; Interview with Official 8). While this does not mean that written evidence is therefore accepted at face value, it means that the evidence is assessed in a different way. I have identified three particular factors.

First, and without doubt most important, is the source of the evidence. This was raised by a lot of interviewees (e.g. Interview with Official 3; Interview with Official 22), and illustrated by these quotes:

> When you're assessing value […] where is that submission coming from? So, who's written it, what expertise do they have in that area and, as I say, it might be professional expertise or it might be person expertise, it might… or it could just be somebody, it could be a random member of the public who has really interesting views on that subject. But that is still slightly different from an eminent professor of oncology holding forth on the same subject. So, I guess, you're always thinking about, "Where is the person writing this coming from and what expertise do they have?" (Interview with Official 7).

> I suppose the first thing you look at is who it's from, because that then gives you that context of whose voices you're getting to hear, kind of trusted voices, maybe how they read or are likely to read politically, you know, what their sort of starting assumptions are likely to be (Interview with Official 11).

> How do I analyse inquiry written evidence? […] I start first with government evidence. I try and understand their position and then I take up key stakeholders for that particular subject area, look at their evidence. Do they refer to anyone who is worth looking at? Then I look at those people […] (Interview with Official 10).

This point is also echoed by MPs:

> Obviously we get written evidence from named sources and so, you know, with particular named sources you obviously focus in on it because it's of interest to see what particular people or particular organisations are saying about things (Interview with MP 1).

> It's a pain in the neck when you get a piece of evidence and you have to think, "Who is this organisation?", or "is this academic group at this university really the cutting edge? I don't know", you know. Where do they fit in? (Interview with MP 2).

For MPs and officials, the source or organisation is a shorthand for (i) identifying different types of knowledge (e.g. professional, scientific, personal/lived experience, policy/political, etc.); (ii) understanding the wider policy landscape and the main players and agenda-setters within it (Interview with Official 18); and (iii) signalling trust, authority or credibility – particularly when committee staff are short on time and unable to do a thorough analysis of evidence. One official readily acknowledged that reliance on sources as identifiers can be a problem because it means there is 'a bit of a bias there', and that it may lead to discounting evidence from other, local or smaller groups that may provide very valuable evidence, too (Interview with Official 19).

A second factor for evaluating written evidence is by assessing the motivation for submitting written evidence. To some degree, this can be gleaned from the organisational affiliation (e.g. an environmental NGO is likely to advocate for stronger and more ambitious environmental regulation). As part of this, it is usually also important to consider the funding that an organisation or individual has received (Interview with Official 11).

Third and finally, and returning to the political nature of the process, officials need to consider how the

evidence may 'play with members' (Interview with Official 11). One official says that you are looking for issues of interest to MPs, which includes those things which are politically contentious or something that members can influence (Interview with Official 1). Consequently, when there are differences in opinion or findings within evidence, officials will point this out: 'it's likely I would put both in the brief and say, so-and-so said this, and so-and-so said the complete opposite, and these might be the reasons why they've come to different conclusions' (Interview with Official 14; echoed in Interview with Official 16). It will then allow MPs to discuss, debate and analyse.

In sum, written evidence becomes especially authoritative and credible for staff based on (i) the source or affiliation, (ii) the likely underlying motivation for submitting evidence, and (iii) how it can feed into political debate. Consequently, echoing findings from Kenny et al. (2017, pp. 23–43), evidence is defined broadly with a less well-developed focus on methodologies. This is not to say that the underpinning research or accuracy of the submission is not investigated. Several officials pointed out that being clear about how organisations come to their conclusions is important (Interview with Official 11), with key references and footnotes followed up to ensure the submission is rigorous (Interview with Official 15). Importantly, however, officials also accepted time is limited for such tasks, and, in any case, evidence is assessed in the round, in which any particular piece of evidence is assessed within the broader body of what has been received to understand disagreements and outliers (Interview with Official 16; Interview with Official 21; Interview with MP 1).

One of the key consequences of the openness of the system of written evidence – anybody can submit – means that the process can come under pressure from large numbers of submissions. Multiple interviewees noted this issue, with one suggesting it is worth re-thinking written evidence:

> I do think we need to rethink written evidence because we get a lot of written evidence and it's under-utilised. And some of that is about messaging and managing messaging with external stakeholders. But it sometimes can be kind of information evidence overload and you can't do it, and I think people are increasingly submitting very, very long submissions. You know, 500-600 pages of evidence is not unusual now for someone to have to analyse for one inquiry. That's a lot of work (Interview with Official 4).

This suggests that volume of evidence has become a challenge. Another official noted that there is a 'growing mismatch between the evidence that comes in and the time that we have to spend on it', indicating that it is the combination of large volumes with less time available for analysis (Interview with Official 21). Precisely what it means to 're-think' written evidence is something that was left open; few had many direct solutions to this challenge (I return to this in Section 11).

A different challenge is the limitation of written evidence being precisely *written*. Not all relevant data or information can be appropriately written down, and for some people this may also be a barrier. Specifically, officials pointed out the lack of video as a form of evidence:

> You can't have … you can ask people on Twitter, you know, "Can you record a […] 30-second video of yourself?", talking about whatever the subject is. You can't use that as evidence. So, normally, it's not such a big obstacle, but I'm sure if we set out minds to it, we could unpick them a bit (Interview with Official 9).

An official echoed this thought, saying it was 'archaic' (Interview with Official 16). The Liaison Committee (2019, paras 102–4) also previously suggested changing this, and while internal guidance has also indicated a way around this issue, video evidence is uncommon.

A final challenge is the UK Parliament's website, which two interviewees called 'rubbish' in its ability to facilitate evidence-gathering and analysis (Interview with MP 2; Interview with Official 1).

3.2. Oral evidence

Oral evidence, meanwhile, plays three different roles in the committee process. First, unlike written evidence, oral testimony is by invitation only. Given limited time and space, oral evidence directly indicates from whom committees *want* to hear (Geddes, 2018). Second, it is part of the process that has the greatest engagement and influence on committee members (Interview with Official 8; Interview with Official 4), making it 'much more important' to MPs than written evidence (Interview with MP 24). It is MPs who ask questions of witnesses and who participate in exchanges. Consequently, and because officials will have read, digested and analysed the majority of written evidence which MPs have not, it means that:

> You need to use oral evidence to make sure they [MPs] hear something that you already know but that will help to bring them all up to the same level of understanding even if they think then different things about those factors or different things about that situation, that they all have access to the same knowledge (Interview with Official 18).

In certain situations, then, oral evidence plays an informative or educational role (for a discussion, see Section 10), especially the first oral evidence session of an inquiry (Interview with Official 19).

A third role of oral evidence is that it allows committees to probe claims:

> I think there is value in having, if you like, real-time interrogation. So they say, "Oh, I think a good solution would be X", you know, and the member can say, "Well, how would it work? What would you do about this? Have you thought about this risk?" I think that's valuable and that would be painful to do in writing (Interview with Official 11).

> Written evidence is what anybody can find out. [...] Oral evidence is where you find out what actually lies behind it (Interview with MP 22).

This point was echoed by several interviewees (e.g. Interview with Official 19; Interview with Official 9; Interview with MP 8). For this reason, MPs like to have different perspectives, with at least two committee chairs noting that they want to bring out 'points of contention' (Interview with MP 17; Interview with MP 12). This allows analysis of evidence to take place in 'real time' and the accuracy of key claims to be investigated (Interview with MP 22). The way that this is done depends on the 'type' of oral evidence session, which are commonly divided into two: information-gathering, whereby committees seek to explore different types of expertise and evidence; and holding-to-account, whereby committees seek to question powerful interests, organisations and government ministers, often in a more adversarial setting.

One issue that some interviewees raised about the analysis of oral evidence is sometimes relying on informal cues to understand MPs' perspectives on them. It is not often that MPs sit to discuss the evidence they have heard immediately after usually long (two/three-hour) committee hearings. While some MPs and officials did not think this was a problem (Interview with MP 22), others believed that it would really help committees if MPs had more opportunities to discuss evidence more often (Interview with MP 14), and would help to give an earlier steer for committee teams on how to use evidence (Interview with Official 19). This largely requires a culture shift, rather than formally introducing further feedback mechanisms.

In sum, oral evidence is distinctive in three ways: it offers particular and favoured access; it engages MPs directly and can play an informational role; and it allows the accuracy of claims to be investigated. By virtue of its direct engagement with MPs, oral evidence is ordinarily privileged in drafting reports (Interview with Official 16; Interview with Official 17). Therefore, the analysis of oral evidence is often for 'usable quotes' in mind (Interview with Official 11). Additionally, some also noted that oral evidence can be an end in itself, to bring out debate and different points of view (Interview with MP 6). This isn't to say that written evidence is somehow less important:

> By the time you've got to the point where you've analysed all your written evidence, you should, at that point, already have a pretty clear idea of the structure of your report and probably the vague area of what your recommendation is going to be (Interview with Official 6).

> By the time you've got to oral evidence, it's relatively unusual – this sounds awful – it's relatively unusual for there to be, like, a massive new whole concept that you haven't already thought of (Interview with Official 11).

We can say that both written and oral evidence play crucial but slightly different roles in the process of gathering evidence.

3.3. Identifying 'good' evidence

In almost all interviews, I discussed how to identify 'good' evidence, whether in a hearing or in writing.

With respect to written evidence, officials explained how the style of the submission can be important:

> If it's well-formatted, it's much easier to negotiate and read through. […] Headings to show that they've actually engaged with what the inquiry is actually about is always useful […] If something's incredibly jargon-y, that we struggle to get through in the time that we have available, then it would be more difficult for us to use that with members (Interview with Official 17).

> Format really does matter and it makes a huge difference when you're scanning over 600 pages; when someone's evidence is concise, well-formatted and bullet-pointed, I'm more likely to read it, definitely (Interview with Official 10).

A recurring issue here is that officials are pressed for time, and clear headings, putting recommendations in bold, and using jargon-free language can help increase the efficiency of analysis. A committee chair also noted that:

> When something's confidently written and confident and competent you just take it so much more seriously. And it's difficult to put your finger on how that is. I suppose it's partly plain English, it's partly someone knowledgeable (Interview with MP 2).

However, another official was also cautious about stylistic considerations, explaining that even though he does this, too, it could mean that those who submit relevant and useful evidence could be missed because they do not tick the boxes of appearing professionally written (Interview with Official 19).

Interviewees identified several ways that negatively affect the value of a submission:
- If it gives a high-level and generic view without adding new information or data on a subject (Interview with Official 1);
- If it gives a very long re-interpretation or summary of the government's existing position, which

officials and MPs already know about (Interview with MP 2);
- If it cites statistics but is not properly referenced or sourced, meaning that it is difficult to verify the data on which the submission is based (Interview with Official 19); and,
- If the evidence is not directly linked to or prepared for the inquiry, such as academic researchers summarising recently published papers (Interview with MP 2).

On this basis, it is possible to identify ways that make written evidence valuable: being clear about value added, being specific, and making an explicit contribution to the inquiry (e.g. addressing the Terms of Reference); being well-researched and backed-up; and, being easy to understand.

With respect to oral evidence, effective or 'good' oral evidence depends on the context of what a committee hearing is trying to achieve (Interview with Official 3). To gather information, interviewees – both MPs and officials – mentioned several different factors:

Being knowledgeable	Having confidence
Being a good communicator	Being clearly prepared (and briefed by officials)
Being succinct	Listening to and answering the questions put to them
Being compelling and engaging for MPs	Acknowledging when you don't know the answer to a question
Understanding the political context	Having clear messages and solutions to problems
Knowing how to talk to politicians	Going beyond the written evidence to bring new insights

Officials explained that the number one reason for the success or failure of a committee hearing is the ability to engage MPs (Interview with Official 3; Interview with Official 21). This is readily acknowledged by MPs, such as in this reflection by one chair (after having listed some of the other factors above):

> Perhaps a bit of a sense of humour, a bit of good illustrative examples that just liven the process up. I mean the best sessions are those that keep you awake [*laughter*] (Interview with MP 24).

In terms of evaluating success, an official explains:

> Has the evidence session given us some good quotes? Are you clearer or are members clearer about the issues which are being examined? And have they been persuaded of something, have they been persuaded of a particular line? Are they engaged? Are they interested? I don't want to say have they had a good time, but do they think their time has been well-spent? (Interview with Official 5).

This suggests some indicators for identifying success, but which are also hard to consistently test, except – perhaps – through the prevalence of the witnesses' quotes in reports.

4. Preparing for committee hearings

In this section, I summarise reflections from MPs and official about how they prepare for committee hearings (bearing in mind that there is a likely skew of MP interviewees that take committee work seriously; those that do not are less likely to have accepted an interview).

4.1. What is the purpose of preparing for committee hearings?

As alluded to in Section 3, MPs engage with written evidence through briefing material supplied by committee teams, and oral evidence by questioning witnesses. In short, briefings facilitate engagement with written evidence, and provide the basis for engaging with oral evidence. Consequently, preparation is important. Each committee team produces briefing papers in their own ways; there is no standard across teams, even if there are some commonalities. Interviewees reflected on the minimum shared standards of briefing material:

> The bare minimum is: who are the witnesses, what's their expertise, what are the suggested questions, how does that impact on what I'm interested in, and how do I tease into it? (Interview with MP 8).

> It needs to impart the information necessary to be able to ask questions from a position of being well-informed (Interview with MP 6).

> The bare minimum brief should tell the members what the witnesses in front of them think as far as we know, so they kind of are coming at it from that point of view, and enough to help them understand why we're suggesting the questions that we're suggesting, what the context is there (Interview with Official 11).

MPs added that brevity, succinctness and timeliness are key factors (Interview with MP 11; Interview with MP 10), while officials also added that briefings should prepare the ground for inquiry reports and recommendations (Interview with Official 1; Interview with Official 4). One chair put it really well, highlighting two key principles that should underpin an effective brief: 'giving appropriate background of why something's important' and 'specific questions that challenge the witness in an appropriate way'. Consequently, it is not uncommon for officials to begin preparing briefings by thinking about and drafting possible lines of questions (Interview with Official 22; Interview with Official 10; Interview with Official 6).

Committees have experimented with different formats, layouts and levels of detail (Interview with Official 1; Interview with MP 12). None work perfectly; a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Nevertheless, there is almost uniform agreement from MPs that they prefer suggested lines for questioning at the front of the document (e.g. Interview with MP 24; Interview with MP 20). And while officials mentioned that they'd like to have oral briefings immediately before a hearing (Interview with Official 14), and some committees do this, MPs resisted this due to time pressures (Interview with MP 22; Interview with MP 14).

4.2. How do MPs prepare?

Within committees, all MPs prepare for committees in their own, distinctive ways. Across interview data, there are three broad approaches.

In the first approach, MPs do their own preparation alongside, or instead of, briefings supplied by officials. Some MPs do this because they are passionate about the topic, because they have a background in re-search or the topic, or because they want to add something distinctive, novel or 'off-piste' to the hearings (Interview with MP 1; Interview with MP 3; Interview with MP 6). Some MPs prepare by thinking about how the material links to their local region, area or constituency (Interview with MP 7; Interview with MP 4), such as this MP:

> Yeah, so I've got somebody who works alongside me for the select committees as well. And we go through the paper when it arrives on the Friday, and then again, we look at relevance of constituency, relevance of things that we've got an interest in. And then also relevance regarding the report that's getting compiled and what do we want to make sure that's within it (Interview with MP 11).

In the second approach, MPs engage predominantly (or only) with the briefing material. For these MPs, the brief helps them to structure their preparation and possible lines of questioning, and who read across the entire document rather than only specific sections (Interview with MP 20; Interview with MP 19; Interview with MP 15) (I return to how MPs engage with, and assess, briefs in the next subsection).

And in the third approach, MPs' engagement with any material is limited. For them, they will dip into the brief when they arrive into the committee meeting but otherwise do not prepare for hearings. Even then, they may not read anything from the brief except the section related to their line of questioning, or none at all. One MP justifies this approach by saying that this enables him to ask the 'common-sense' questions, the 'obvious' ones that might otherwise be lost in the depths of an inquiry (Interview with MP 23). Another MP reflects:

> [The] standard operating procedure, I am afraid, is to look at the questions, see what there is particular interest to me, and then work back from that. And, read the briefing related to that (Interview with MP 14).

Across these three themes, practice varies significantly, but these were the broader commonalities. This was largely accepted by officials, with one saying that this is 'normal and human' (Interview with Official 11). Nevertheless, a lack of preparation by MPs can be a source of frustration. One chair explained that 'you wouldn't get away with [this behaviour] in any other job' (Interview with MP 2), while an official pointed out that witnesses go to considerable lengths to prepare for hearings by comparison, including how to deal with potentially difficult questions (Interview with Official 19).[4]

4.3. MPs' engagement with, and assessments of, briefing papers

While MPs' engagement differs significantly, there was a commonly shared practice – among those that use them – of reading briefing material on trains or over weekends. Many MPs liked having their briefings ready on Thursday and/or Friday, for hearings the following week (Interview with MP 12; Interview with MP 7). Several suggested that, ideally, they would receive briefings one week ahead of a hearing (Interview with MP 8; Interview with MP 10; Interview with MP 7), though they recognised why this was difficult for officials to achieve.

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4   At least two MPs said that they previously worked with PR companies that support witnesses to give evidence in front of select committees.

In terms of how MPs engage with briefings, many prioritised background information about witnesses that are due to appear (including information that witnesses may have supplied in written evidence), and the sections related to their likely lines of questioning (Interview with MP 8). For some, they valued having written evidence submitted to the inquiry readily available to follow-up if needed, even if they did not do so often (Interview with MP 20; Interview with MP 14). Chairs usually took briefs more seriously, explaining that they act as a guide or agenda for the entire meeting (Interview with MP 10; Interview with MP 16; Interview with MP 2).

One question that was raised by officials was if MPs, who know the policy area very well and/or have worked in the area before becoming an MP, find briefing material useful. The short answer is yes. Those MPs that I interviewed who seemed to have unparalleled knowledge of their topic said that briefings helped them to keep up-to-date about the trends and public debates in the area, especially if briefings included information about the government's current position and media coverage of the topic (Interview with MP 17; Interview with MP 24).

As with the brief overall, members' engagement with suggested lines for questioning varies. Nobody confessed to reading out questions (in practice, it does happen). Instead, MPs said that they either used suggested areas for questioning to structure their thinking, or ignored them. For those that did not use questions, they explained that in various ways. For one, he believed that it showed an MP hadn't read the brief or analysed independently (Interview with MP 22); another, referring to hearings with ministers, was suspicious that briefs can get leaked to ministers (Interview with MP 1); while a further MP explained that suggested questions are less likely to be political ones, which he would prefer to ask (Interview with MP 23). Regardless of the approach used, MPs also indicated that the real way to judge whether MPs have prepared is if they ask follow-up questions (Interview with MP 24).

4.4. Challenges

In almost all interviews with officials, I asked them to reflect on the main challenges in writing a good brief. Three themes were raised.

First, time pressure to write a draft. Several noted that two weeks is an ideal amount of time to write a brief (Interview with Official 1; Interview with Official 2; Interview with Official 14), suggesting that committee hearings for the same inquiry should be spaced at least two weeks apart. One official said that 'you can cobble one together in a week', but the quality will be poorer (Interview with Official 14). One method that officials regularly use to save time is focusing on suggested lines for questioning witnesses as the first step. While this was a common practice among teams, one official noted some caution about this because, 'if we draw our questions from [our] existing base, then we're potentially limiting the scope and usefulness of the evidence that we eventually gather' (Interview with Official 2).

Second, due the significant variability in their use, it is challenging to ensure that a brief has the right level of detail for different types of member engagement. As one official put it, the brief needs to be useful for 'the person who's reading it at their semi-leisure on a weekend in full to the person who just needs a quick

glance so that they don't come completely unstuck asking a witness a question' (Interview with Official 11). Learning how to put the right amount of detail (Interview with Official 15), and pitched at the right level (Interview with Official 17), is difficult. Based on interview data, MPs generally favoured shorter briefings (Interview with MP 10; Interview with MP 12), with the option to follow-up with further research (Interview with MP 20).[5]

Third, building out of the above issue, one official raised the question: 'what is the minimum acceptable standard for a briefing?' (Interview with Official 1). While the emphasis has been that committee teams should not 'gold-plate' briefings, this official was unsure when something was enough. This problem feeds into a broader question about how to evaluate effective briefings.

4.5. Evaluating briefings

While principles have been identified in the first sub-section of this part of the report, perhaps more could be done regarding how those principles look in practice. Furthermore, to support effective scrutiny, perhaps there are ways to evaluate member engagement with briefings, such as the proportion of MPs that use briefing material to structure their participation in hearings, or the proportion of a brief that was used to underpin interactions between witnesses and committee members.

Aside from the length of briefings, it is worth stressing that MPs had few direct suggestions for improvement. No MP criticised the quality of briefings. The opposite: MPs' assessments of briefings are highly positive. Typical responses (among others) were that briefs are 'excellent' (Interview with MP 10; Interview with MP 24), 'incredibly valuable' (Interview with MP 4) or 'always rigorously written and prepared' (Interview with MP 15). There were two isolated examples of improvements (which are likely to be member-specific): in one case, by an MP who acknowledges himself to be a 'technophobe', the member preferred printed copies of briefings (Interview with MP 22); in another, a very experienced and knowledgeable member believed that there is too much emphasis on political balance at the expense of analysis (Interview with MP 3) (officials point out that it is not their place to start a debate in the briefing material (Interview with Official 17)).

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5   Curiously, MPs almost always spoke about length of briefings in terms of pages, rather than in terms of word count (possibly they do not have access to that data). Given the variability in formats, layouts and font sizes, focusing on word count seems a better way to measure length.

5. Innovations in evidence-gathering

In recent years, as shown through a commissioned report for the House of Commons Liaison Committee (2015), traditional or formal evidence has been increasingly supplemented through a range of further public engagement and 'informal' (Interview with Official 9) evidence-gathering activities. One longstanding mechanism is through a committee visit. Though put on hold for most of 2020 and 2021, several interviewees noted that they are incredibly valuable to informing MPs and want more of these (Interview with MP 11; Interview with MP 1; Interview with MP 17). One MP has suggested that committees should hold oral evidence outside of Westminster more regularly, to 'take [the committee] right into the heart of the subject matter that we're discussing', which would send 'a hugely powerful political statement' (Interview with MP 11). A second mechanism that several interviewees mentioned included private roundtables (sometimes referred to as focus groups) with stakeholders and, usually, people with relevant lived experience of an issue or affected by a policy. One official described one case where this was done and 'obviously, definitely factored into the final response of the members' even if this was not formal evidence (Interview with Official 13). MPs also praised this as a way to inform inquiries (Interview with MP 17; Interview with MP 19), which can be 'the most powerful evidence' for an inquiry (Interview with MP 24).

In response to the calls for greater public engagement, the SCT has introduced and expanded a public engagement team. Some of this is through innovations in informal evidence-gathering, as above, or about broadening the base of written evidence through wider advertisement of committee inquiries via social media, promotional videos, discussions on radio programmes, etc. (Interview with MP 10; Interview with Official 17). However, the extent of innovation in evidence-gathering depends on the interest and will of members. As one official put it:

> If they're not really eager for lots of innovation, then you kind of have to change your expectations, and you can weave it in in certain ways, but ultimately, the most important thing is working with the committee as opposed to trying to work against it, and sometimes you have to accept that that means there are limits on what's possible (Interview with Official 17).

This is a key point, echoed by others (Interview with Official 8), which reminds us of the crucial importance of MPs to drive forward the process. Nevertheless, informal ways of gathering evidence have continued to expand.

While innovations in evidence-gathering have created many benefits in bringing new types of information into Parliament and allowed different groups to get involved with parliamentary processes, they have also caused challenges. In particular, officials voiced concern about the procedures of gathering and using evidence gathered in innovative ways:

> The way in which we don't talk about informal stuff as "Evidence", so you know, if we go out and if we do a roundtable talking to folk affected by a particular policy or whatever it is, we don't call that "Evidence". And I know … I'm not sure I really understand why this is, but the engagement team tell me that one of the problems they have sometimes is people not then knowing what kind of output to produce, how to bring it to bear in the final report of an inquiry, what then to do with it, and I think that's a kind of weakness in our process kind of practically, and it's a weakness, I think, in how we kind of present our hierarchies of what's important (Interview with Official 11).

This quote clearly encapsulates several issues: that innovations or informal data and information doesn't 'count' in the same way or at least isn't *seen* to count in the same way; that the process isn't able to integrate it properly; and that there is a lack of clarity around the way that this form of knowledge gained can be used (a similar theme is echoed by other interviewees e.g. Interview with Official 16; Interview with Official 22). I return to this issue, and the challenges it brings, in the concluding section.

6. The growing role of lived experience

The idea of 'lived experience' was mentioned in the majority of interviews. The term was frequently used to refer to an individual's direct experiences of, and engagement with, the state.[6] This could include not only service users, such as NHS patients or transport users, but also business owners and companies that have taken part in a government scheme or been affected by a government policy (Interview with MP 21). It usually excluded general public opinion or letter-writing campaigns on an issue.

6.1. Causes

Most interviewees noted that 'lived experience' has grown in significance in the last 5-10 years, and gave the following reasons:
- The belief, particularly by chairs, that it increases the likelihood of press coverage for the committee (Interview with Official 3);
- Political debate has become more mature, in which it is more accepted and valid to talk about personal experiences (Interview with Official 8);
- It is something that MPs regularly hear in other aspects of their role, notably through constituency service (Interview with Official 3), so they are familiar with it;
- Institutionally, Parliament has invested in public engagement, with select committees perceived as a particularly good avenue (Interview with Official 3; Interview with Official 18);
- It is seen as a mechanism to go beyond the 'usual suspects' (Interview with Official 18; Interview with Official 17; and,
- The digital age has 'magnified' the ability for citizens to connect with Parliament and vice versa (Interview with Official 8; Interview with Official 13; Interview with Official 9).

Among these causes, it is also possible to identify the perceived normative value of 'lived experience', which I probed in most interviews.

6.2. Value of 'lived experience'

The first and most common answer that explained the value of 'lived experience' was because it is seen as powerful. This one word – 'powerful' – was used in several interview responses (Interview with MP 5; Interview with MP 11; Interview with MP 16; Interview with Official 7; Interview with Official 6). The power of such evidence is that it reminds MPs (and officials) how their work in Parliament (and the rules, policies and legislation set by government) directly affects 'real' or 'normal' or 'ordinary' people (Interview with MP 3; Interview with MP 5); to see 'what the reality was on the ground' (Interview with MP 4). Such evidence can create a sense of urgency or re-prioritise committee work, and allows MPs to make a more compelling case for changes to policy:

> With something like flooding, someone talks about the trauma of flood, it's that testimony which is very powerful for politicians to then make a case to government, "Look, we've heard this harrowing evidence, please can you do something about it?" (Interview with MP 20).

However, if such arguments affect government policy or committee recommendations is another question altogether.

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6   There were individual nuances and differences between interviewees' interpretation, but this is the best composite definition.

Second, sometimes lived experience is the only way to access knowledge about a particular issue. One interviewee noted that the impacts of certain policies on certain groups are not necessarily represented by a bigger body or advocacy group (Interview with Official 10); another interviewee explained that some campaigning organisations may not accurately reflect the views of constituent groups (Interview with Official 11), while a further interviewee said it can be 'disempowering' for people to only see representative groups heard in Parliament (Interview with Official 15). In one specific example, an official explained how her committee's use of a roundtable with service users opened up whole new questions for an inquiry to which nobody – ministers included – had an answer (Interview with Official 21). This means that lived experience can offer new directions for scrutiny.

Third, lived experience is used to 'add colour' to evidence (Interview with Official 16) or to bring 'subjects to life' (Interview with Official 7), i.e. to help with member engagement. This connects closely to the way that such evidence is used in practice, which is as supplementary to other types of information. Many distinguished between lived experience as *illustrative* rather than *explanatory*, and that it therefore plays a different role to other information.

6.3. Challenges of using 'lived experience' in select committee work

The use of lived experience raised challenges. First, several questioned the added value. Although it can add 'colour', as noted above, the substantive value of this form of evidence was not always clear. One official explained that committees may forget their scrutiny function (Interview with Official 9). Another said that often you hear the loudest voices and activists, and there are questions about how to make sure that these voices are representative (Interview with Official 3). The Liaison Committee (2019, paras 135–6) previously noted that engagement needed to take a more purposeful approach. Many MPs were positive; only one voiced direct scepticism (Interview with MP 13).

Second, even if the value is clear, it may not be 'usable'. One official explained that deeply personal information makes individuals easily identifiable (Interview with Official 13). In a different situation, this type of information wasn't seen as valuable because MPs didn't agree with the direction of travel:

> I know someone in one of my old teams who has [done a survey on a specific topic]. And they're not going to really use it at all in the report because Members didn't like what it said. And you don't have to, because it's not evidence really. So it begs the point of what the point was of doing it in the first place. Yeah. So I think it just adds to evidence but it wouldn't be the basis of it (Interview with Official 12).

This revealing quote summarises some of the difficulties in using evidence, but also a third challenge about resources. Several interviewees noted that some inquiries with significant public engagement or advocacy group involvement can lead to thousands of written submissions (e.g. the Women and Equalities Committee (2021) received over 2,000 as part of its inquiry into reforms to the Gender Recognition Act). Consequently, officials are 'locked in a treadmill' to try and process information (Interview with Official 9). The written evidence process was, arguably, not designed for thousands of submissions of evidence, especially with very small teams of people managing these inquiries.

Fourth, building on the above, lived experience can be highly personal and difficult to read, with harrowing, sad or traumatic experiences expressed in writing that usually only one or two officials would have to read (Interview with Official 13). This brings further challenges:

> That brings all sorts of difficulties like: are they willing to speak in public or will they only give evidence to the committee anonymously? If they are giving evidence in public, do they truly understand what that means

and is it putting them at any risk? Are they aware and fully comprehend that it will be online and forever? Do you feel confident they are able to make that decision or do they need someone to support them with that decision? Or are you in some way taking advantage of their desire to tell their story […] almost capitalising on that and maybe not putting their interests first […] (Interview with Official 18).

This point was also echoed by other interviewees (Interview with Official 15; Interview with Official 4). To respond to this issue, the Select Committee Team has appointed a safeguarding officer, published guidance, and provides training to staff. Another official has suggested that inquiries should always have at least two officials supporting an inquiry so that they can collaboratively make sense of the evidence (Interview with Official 13).

Finally, some officials have raised questions about using lived experience within the current framework of gathering and using evidence. For example, providing written evidence via Microsoft Word can be a 'big barrier for a lot of people', and perhaps isn't even the right forum for lived experience given the volume and nature of information received (Interview with Official 11). In response, select committees have made use of alternative and informal evidence-gathering techniques to lower the amount of written evidence (Interview with Official 16; Interview with Official 18), as summarised in the previous section. But, as the earlier example on the use of surveys for a committee's inquiry shows, this may not always be used. Furthermore, one official explained how using other information needs to be written up and published as an annex, which inevitably raised the question of whether that is the best use of evidence and resources (Interview with Official 16).

This discussion raises a number of important questions about the evolution of select committees. While many have embraced lived experience as a form of evidence, the value of it is not always clear, and also raises the question of whether it is adequately integrated into committee processes. The SCT may wish to address the following two questions:
1. To what extent do committees have clear principles under what circumstances 'lived experience' is valuable, and when it should be actively sought and integrated into committee work?
2. To what extent are current processes for gathering evidence adequate for integrating evidence from a 'lived experience' perspective?

The first issue will require clarity in order to prevent committees from raising expectations about this form of evidence, and allow clarity for officials and MPs to understand the circumstances for when this type of evidence should inform committee work. The second issue is a recurring theme about the overall process to which I return in the conclusion.

7. Beyond the usual suspects: diversity and inclusion

Reflections on the diversity of evidence (particular with respect to witnesses) was mentioned in several interviews and spontaneously connected to issues relating to innovations in evidence-gathering, lived experience, and the 'usual suspects', by which interviewees meant known organisations and witnesses that regularly submit written evidence or are invited to participate in oral evidence.

7.1. Diversity of what?

By diversity, MPs and officials usually referred to (i) political views; (ii) organisational affiliation (often used as a proxy for political views); (iii) personal characteristics, such as gender or ethnicity; and, (iv) geography. The first of these is often seen as the most important. One MP said that:

> I would say, actually, having a diversity of views is probably the most important thing. So, over the course of a session, having people who can give different points of view about the same thing (Interview with MP 4).

Political balance is an unsurprising consideration. Second and relatedly, diversity was also about organisations (e.g. universities, industry voices, charities and NGOs, think tanks, policy-making bodies, etc.), which often offer a shorthand for different types of expertise (Interview with Official 11) and could be used as a proxy for different political views.

A third way to think about diversity was in terms of personal characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity or social class. One MP said:

> If it's a bunch of white men, you slightly despair at that, just because having a diverse range of perspectives around any table is for me sort of an important point of principle that gets better decision-making, better discussion, better evidence (Interview with MP 15).

This echoes another interviewee that explained her approach to proactively seek out organisations that support minority groups to ensure their voices are heard more in her respective policy area (Interview with Official 1). A fourth and final way of thinking about diversity comes in terms of geography, with an MP commenting:

> The fount of all knowledge about a particular subject matter doesn't reside in London and therefore I think it's vitally important to get voices from other parts of England (Interview with MP 1).

Other MPs echoed similar sentiments about different parts of the UK (Interview with MP 5; Interview with MP 7). The key shared point for many is that MPs want to get beyond the so-called 'usual suspects' (Interview with MP 24), which – for some – are closely connected to issues around diversity, inclusion and lived experience.

7.2. Why is diversity important?

At least three reasons came up in interview data. First, it leads to better decision-making. Several interviewees believed that greater diversity was a reasonable proxy for a better-quality scrutiny process. Other interviewees echoed this:

> The committee benefits from having witnesses who will challenge each other's perspective […] If you've got a diverse range of witnesses at the table, it's much more likely that between them, they will help the committee to get deeper into an issue if they're challenging each other's perspective (Interview with MP 15).

> You're not going to get new ideas if you just speak to people with very common experiences all the time (Interview with Official 1).

This is underpinned by a belief that the best available evidence does not currently reside in a disproportionately high number of male witnesses or from the same organisations (Allen, 2018; Celis and Childs, 2020).

Second, interviewees believed that issues about diversity are issues about democracy and fairness, which Parliament must address:

> We're meant to be all about promoting democracy. It's important in and of itself to make Parliament accessible to people from all walks of life and to give people from all walks of life a voice in Parliament and the opportunity to use Parliament as a platform for whatever it is (Interview with Official 1).

This does raise an interesting question about the function and role of select committees, to which I return in Section 10.

And third, mentioned less frequently, is that diverse voices are inherently more interesting: 'it's really boring listening to the same people for six months, you want something that reignites the members' interest in the inquiry' (Interview with Official 17). Although it may seem superficial or less important, another official said that the success of committee work in part depends on sustaining member engagement (Interview with Official 5; Interview with Official 8).

7.3. Overcoming barriers to greater diversity

MPs acknowledged the hard work of staff and that achieving diversity is not easy. Few had any issues about political diversity.[7] Parliament itself has also worked hard on diversity through the greater monitoring of diversity statistics. Parliament now publishes witness diversity reports on a regular basis, and internally gathers more information on protected characteristics. One official has been positive about this:

> It has created not only an incentive, but almost an expectation that you would think very proactively about how you could engage as wide as possible a group of people on any given issue (Interview with Official 17).

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7 In one interview, an MP said that 'sometimes we can be a bit … static in our thinking around NGOs' (Interview with MP 11), and hoped that select committees could engage more with community-based organisations. This was a somewhat isolated example, but from a very small sample.

Another official was also positive and hoped that high response rates would allow for the data to be published (Interview with Official 9). Nevertheless, the same interviewee also expressed a bit of caution about diversity, asking: 'what is it we're trying to achieve?' He thinks that the SCT hasn't quite worked out 'where we want to be yet'.

If diversity was acknowledged as a positive principle for select committees to pursue, discussion turned to the barriers that prevented greater diversity (and therefore the focus for addressing and improving diversity). They include: (i) time pressures; (ii) the views of MPs; (iii) the performative element of hearings; (iv) framing of inquiries and the lack of control over certain types of witnesses. I discuss each in turn.

Time pressure is a recurring theme. It affects diversity of evidence in several ways. First, the pressure on time to organise committee hearings and to analyse written evidence means that officials have to rely on the usual suspects. For instance, one official explained that if there is no time to systematically go through all the evidence (and especially large volumes), then she will have to take a sample from those organisations that are trusted or whose policy positions are likely to be more easily identifiable (Interview with Official 11). Second, it takes time for organisations to prepare submissions. Established organisations have noted that timeframes for submitting written evidence can be tight (Interview with Official 21) (House of Commons Liaison Committee, 2019, para. 96). This is even more acute for those organisations that do not ordinarily engage with committees. Officials need to proactively reach out to organisations or groups and explain to them how select committees operate (Interview with Official 1; Interview with MP 2). As a result, 'when you're struggling to meet your minimums', diversity can become a 'nice-to-have' (Interview with Official 1). This problem was directly acknowledged by one chair, who suggested that 'we should have more resource around that [diversification of sources of evidence]' (Interview with MP 17). Third, time pressures also affect witnesses. Hearings are organised with no flexibility for the date or time, and sometimes also at short notice, meaning that witnesses may not be available (Interview with Official 11), often depending on profession and if they have caring responsibilities. Others noted that times to submit written evidence may not be long enough for small organisations, so may choose not to engage (Interview with Official 14; Interview with MP 2).

A second barrier for diverse witnesses is whether this should be a priority for committees. This is an area where the SCT has no control:

> Some chairs would be really keen and some chairs will not be very keen and that does have a big impact on what people try and, you know, how diverse and how much effort is made to diversify that evidence (Interview with Official 4).

> The diversity and inclusion one, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, a sense that certain groups have been too excessively excluded, that is highly prominent among committee staff, but it's more contested among some members who don't take kindly to what they see as attempts to impose witnesses on them (Interview with Official 20).

Other officials noted implicit bias, too, with one saying that MPs 'expect to hear from their mirror image' because 'that's who they trust to give them their information' (Interview with Official 14). Another official reflected on a case when a male MP 'laid into' three women witnesses, using information not provided by committee staff, which the committee team felt would not have happened if the witnesses were men (Interview with Official 2). Related to this point is a further, third, barrier to diversity, which is the expected

performative capacity of witnesses. A 'good' hearing requires particular elements, not least particular communication skills from witnesses. One official explained that it can be 'quite a big risk' not knowing how somebody will perform in an oral evidence session, and so the usual suspects can be a safer option (Interview with Official 11).

A fourth barrier is the nature of policy areas and the way that inquiries are framed. This works in several ways. First, there are certain witnesses over which committees have no control at all, such as the chief executive of a major organisation or public sector body that the committee is scrutinising. For this reason, witness diversity information is published with the distinction between discretionary and non-discretionary witnesses. Second, and relatedly, one interviewee pointed out that 'it can be hard to avoid the usual suspects because they are big players in particular fields of industry' (Interview with MP 16). And third, an official explained that the design of inquiries affects diversity: giving the example of air pollution, the call for evidence can be scientific and technical, in which case it would favour certain types of expertise, or it can include questions about impacts on different types of communities, in which case it is likely to allow for greater diversity. In other words:

> Rather than saying, "Let's get witnesses in with gender diversity", let's add to that and think about the design of our inquiries in the first place, right from the beginning, to frame your inquiry so that there is an aspect of it that looks at under-represented groups, for example. And you'd be surprised how many inquiries that could apply to (Interview with Official 12).

This point is linked also to the wider role of committees and who and what they scrutinise, to which I return in Section 10.

A fifth barrier, though not mentioned in interviews often, is the physical accessibility of the parliamentary estate. Not only can it be time consuming and difficult to travel to London, the buildings themselves are not always easy to navigate. While digital participation can address this to some extent, the Restoration and Renewal programme at Westminster could be a crucial opportunity to address these issues.

In terms of solutions, interviewees made two suggestions:
1. Greater resources. For example, covering childcare should be made more readily available and/or advertised when planning oral evidence. Indirectly, greater resources could be provided through additional staff capacity (see Section 8) to allow more time to build relationships to bring in diverse witnesses.
2. Greater transparency. While diversity data is currently collected, one further step would be to publish this openly (provided the data is reliable). Alternatively, the SCT could monitor the proportion of witnesses or organisations that are new to giving evidence, and considering what success might look like (e.g. at least one new organisation for every committee in any given year, or for every inquiry, etc.).

8. Capacity: structures and resources underpinning evidence use

A recurring theme in interviews revolved around the capacity of staff to conduct analysis of evidence and support select committees, specifically around: time, staff, and skills. These reflections are largely based on a small number of comments from officials, and not the core focus of my report. I comment on these only insofar as they affect evidence use.

8.1. Time

Time is one of the most important resources in Parliament, which was regularly mentioned as a key challenge throughout this report (see also Kenny et al., 2017, pp. 47–48). Time pressures particularly affect staff capacity. One member of staff explained that evidence-gathering feels like a 'conveyer belt' given the constant stream of work. When he doesn't have time to read every piece of written evidence, then 'that really fills me with absolute terror' because he worries about things that could have been missed (Interview with Official 19). This was echoed by other interviewees, who noted that they cannot always conduct analysis in as rigorous a way as they would like (Interview with Official 17). Nevertheless, it is inevitable, particularly when you also consider the volume of evidence:

> If you've got like 150 pieces of evidence and your chair has kicked off and decided that they want the first evidence session to be really soon and you're just not going to have time to go through that evidence properly and organise a session, then you do shortcuts (Interview with Official 1).

Her approach is to subsequently take a sample of organisations to conduct analysis:

> I will rely on the people that engage with us a lot, the people whose evidence I know is going to be high-quality based on past experience of their evidence […] detailed and informative […] and I will come back to the rest of it as and when, if I have time (Interview with Official 1).

This was echoed by another official, who said that, under time pressure, she would 'focus on the organisations or the individuals that I know have the most prominent voices in this [policy area]' (Interview with Official 16).

Pressure on time has obvious consequences for how evidence is used. First, echoing Section 3.1., it shows us that the organisational affiliation is a quick method for assessing credibility of evidence. Individuals and institutions with good reputations for high-quality submissions are trusted. Second, time is not available for officials to proactively seek diverse witnesses or to make sure that an inquiry is as inclusive as it could be. Several interviewees accepted that there could be a bias in the outcome as a result (Interview with Official 6; Interview with Official 19).

The pressures of time are intense and constant, which can also have an impact on morale and wellbeing (Interview with Official 19). One official cited time pressures as the reason for moving out of the SCT for a secondment (Interview with Official 1). To counter-act this, several interviewees said that committees should slow down, or staff given more time (and resources), to conduct analysis of evidence, which would also have benefits for diversity (Interview with Official 21). One specific good practice that interviewees mentioned is to have at least two weeks between evidence sessions, so that staff have enough time to

analyse evidence and write briefing papers at a reasonable pace (Interview with Official 19; Interview with Official 2).

Lack of time is a wider problem in politics generally, so it may be difficult to address this. Further, time is connected to other issues across the SCT and to scrutiny, especially (i) volumes of evidence or numbers of tasks staff are asked to perform and, (ii) wider staffing and resourcing challenges. This, then, brings me to the second theme.

8.2. Staff

Staff were uniformly praised by MPs: 'absolutely critical' (Interview with 12), 'absolutely vital' (Interview with MP 16), 'fabulous' and 'tremendous' (Interview with MP 7), 'absolutely beyond excellent' and a 'privilege watching them work' (Interview with MP 11), 'brilliant' (Interview with MP 16; Interview with MP 22) and 'excellent' (Interview with MP 20), among other things.[8]

The Select Committee Team, formerly Committee Office, has changed and modernised considerably in the last 10 years. The senior leadership team has expanded and includes non-clerk roles, which is one of several signs of the way that Parliament has begun to value different career paths. In the past, there was a perception that specialist knowledge was not valued and that specialists did not have prospects for career progression. This has now, at least in part, changed (Interview with Official 3; Interview with Official 17; Interview with Official 6). This has also been enhanced through greater research clusters, such as around international relations or climate and environment (Interview with Official 3; Interview with Official 1).

When I asked interviewees about how to improve evidence-gathering, several mentioned the importance of more time and staff (Interview with Official 18; Interview with Official 19; Interview with MP 10). As one official put it, 'we are under-resourced for the work that we do. So, you know, I mean the answer could be more staff or it could be less output', but the problem with the latter is that MPs are used to a certain level of output that is difficult to reduce (Interview with Official 1). One of the reasons for pressures on staff is the significance of unprecedented challenges in UK politics since 2016, including Brexit from 2016 onwards, general elections in 2017 and 2019, a global health pandemic from 2020 onwards, and war in Ukraine since 2022 (with significant wider repercussions for domestic and international politics). Consequently, 'if you have exceptional years for five years on the trot when everyone has got loads more work to do than normal, then actually that is just the new normal' (Interview with Official 1). For another official, committee teams could get better at pushing back against the demands of MPs to explain that some things are just not feasible (Interview with Official 21). A second, related reason for the growing pressures on staff is the expanding role of the state. One chair explained that his committee not only scrutinises the central department, but also a significant number of regulators, which can be challenging without adequate resources. He concluded: 'the independence and power of select committees has improved over the years and that's great, but there's more to do around resource, capacity, time' (Interview with MP 17).

A third and final cause for growing committee work and a need for staff is the expanding scope of committee tasks and responsibilities. This has three specific impacts. First, with greater public engagement, more evidence from the perspective of 'lived experience', and a commitment to greater diversity and inclusion means that there is a challenge for adequate resources to keep pace with innovations and being able to integrate many different voices. One chair believed that more staffing should be prioritised to deal with social media (Interview with MP 10); others argued more staff are a prerequisite for further innovation,

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8   Only one MP noted that he is 'suspicious' about being 'steered' by staff (interview not numbered for reasons of anonymity).

such as allowing video evidence or non-written formats (Interview with Official 18; Interview with Official 17). Second, as the amount of personal evidence increases, 'we have more instances of evidence which is distressing to read, causes safeguarding concerns and is challenging for those involved in reading and analysing that evidence and deciding what to do in advising a committee about that evidence' (Interview with Official 8). A safeguarding officer has been introduced, which alleviates some of these issues. And third, greater diversity means that staff need to take more time to explain to individuals and organisations new to Parliament about how to write good submissions or to explain the scrutiny process. One chair said that more resource is required to explain how committees work and what they look for (Interview with MP 2).

8.3. Skills

Parliament is well-equipped in terms of staff through not only specialists that work directly for select committees but also in-house research from the parliamentary libraries and POST, and their ability to appoint outside specialist advisers *ad hoc* based on need. Nevertheless, some staff did raise areas where improvements could be made.

First, interviewees explained that staff are not always equipped to undertake innovations. With respect to surveys, one official acknowledged that it is done in a 'slightly amateurish way' and that they are rarely useful (Interview with Official 9). He went on to say that he would like an in-house polling team to do this type of work properly. This was echoed by another official who said that staff 'lack a lot of the skill', and that, without proper training or a team to go to, it would be 'unfair' to ask colleagues to do this kind of work (Interview with Official 12).

Second, staff also noted the growing trend towards use of evidence that require staff to be more 'data literate' (Interview with Official 20). One official explained that there is a lack of statistics knowledge in the SCT:

> I don't think everybody has to be a statistician, but I think we need them to know how to read statistics or know… or that they need to know that they can't and that they should get someone else to check them (Interview with Official 15).

The same applies to qualitative research. One MP explained that a private roundtable that had been organised to understand the views of young people on a policy issue was not, in the end, particularly useful because the pool of young people involved were university students studying issues relating to that policy (Interview with MP 15).

Third, some staff noted that the emphasis on generalist knowledge in the SCT is at the expense of specialist knowledge (Interview with Official 12), and that this could be a 'risk' if they are unable to weigh up different sectoral interests (Interview with Official 14). One further interviewee contrasted the depth of sharing good practice on procedural issues, and suggested that there should be more dedicated training on how to analyse evidence, such as a basic course on NVivo, to make sure that subject-specific knowledge and analytical skills are as well developed as procedural knowledge (Interview with Official 6). This has, in part, been addressed through the introduction of a 'policy research and analytical community', or PRAC (Interview with Official 20).

This section indicates that, although there are some issues, the SCT is evolving and being responsive to the needs of staff. It is also important to bear in mind that I spoke to only a very small proportion of the SCT, so the thoughts raised here should be treated with caution.

9. The impact of Covid-19 on evidence-gathering

Covid-19 was not the main topic under investigation for this fellowship, but it was inescapable given the timeframe of research. In interviews, MPs and officials reflected on the impact of Covid-19, and especially online hearings, for evidence-gathering.

9.1. Benefits of online hearings

Covid-19, and the technological need for online meetings, has broadened the evidence base in Parliament according to almost all interviewees, especially in terms of geography:

> I think it's changed the mind-set of members on international witnesses because they now just think they are very readily available (Interview with Official 4).

> I think the utilisation of virtual participation, it's a huge step forward and that gives you the opportunity speak to the preeminent experts across the world, doesn't it? (Interview with MP 11).

> You can probably get people who would have found it very difficult to travel to London on a Wednesday morning to give evidence to a committee (Interview with MP 10).

Alongside geography, others noted the benefits for accessibility in other ways. One official noted that people with very structured working lives would be more likely to be able to give evidence because less of their time would be needed (Interview with Official 6); another explained that it means that people with caring responsibilities or with disabilities can more readily participate in democratic processes (Interview with Official 16). Other benefits mentioned by interviewees was about saving time, the carbon footprint, money and resources (Interview with Official 4; Interview with Official 14).

9.2. Challenges of online meetings

Moving to online meetings is not problem-free. Almost every interviewee said that they preferred to be in meetings in-person, and that these interactions in hearings are better than online. The reason for this stems from several pointers, but mostly body language:

> [Witnesses] can only see what the camera points at [...] they can't see the other members glancing at their phone because they're bored or sitting on the edge of their seat because they're really engaged, and that, I presume, must change the way that they deliver evidence (Interview with Official 2).

> [Witnesses] get a little bit of a short deal because they can't read the body language of anyone in the room ... they don't know when another witness is nodding with them or shaking their head or wants to come in off the back of something (Interview with Official 10).

This sentiment was widely shared by others, who explained that it is more difficult to build rapport (Interview with MP 24), that you are unable to get the 'feeling in the room' (Interview with MP 4), or that you feel more 'connected' in real life (Interview with Official 16). This has been substantiated by academic research. Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey (2017, 2022), for instance, has shown the importance for nonverbal communication on deliberative accountability in Parliament; specifically that there is a clear link between assessments of accountability and the body language used by MPs and witnesses.

For some, hybrid hearings (with some participants online, others in the room) has made chairing meetings more difficult because it is more disruptive to ask follow-up questions without interrupting proceedings (Interview with MP 21). One official observed that follow-up questions are far more frequent in live hearings rather than online ones (Interview with Official 22).

The challenges raised in this section are particularly important for those kinds of committee hearings where MPs need to hold witnesses to account, especially ministers. One official, for example, said that 'you get a nice piece of armour by being detached and appearing behind a screen. It's more difficult to, kind of, make someone really uncomfortable through a TV' (Interview with Official 6), which was echoed by others (Interview with MP 24; Interview with Official 14). The point was made most forcefully by this MP:

> I think the only way that Parliament works, the only way the select committee works, is by human being getting together physically. And for the last two years, or 18 months, we've pretended that Parliament was scrutinising what the government was doing and hasn't. […] A few keen people have found electronic ways of asking questions but it really didn't work. And ministers could bat them off remarkably simply. Whereas having a minister in front of you in the chamber or indeed in front of a select committee, really does give you the opportunity to give them a hard time and show the whole thing up properly (Interview with MP 22).

9.3. Where next for online meetings?

While there was consensus around the drawbacks of online meetings, for many these were a small price to pay for broadening the evidence base (Interview with Official 3; Interview with Official 16; Interview with Official 7). Views varied about how far this should be taken: for most MPs that I had interviewed, online participation in committee work for witnesses is acceptable if not ideal, but MPs must attend in-person (e.g. Interview with MP 9; Interview with MP 23; Interview with MP 13); for one MP, virtual attendance for MPs was ok as a last resort (Interview with MP 15); and, in a minority of cases, MPs suggested that hybrid working should become permanent across Parliament (e.g. Interview with MP 5; Interview with MP 18).

Interview data suggests an emerging consensus that there are clear benefits for allowing witnesses to participate virtually where this is appropriate, but both (i) MPs and (ii) those witnesses to be held to account should attend in person. Curiously, no interviewee suggested that Covid-19 had an impact on evidence-gathering in another way, except possible short-term disruption at the beginning of the pandemic. This suggests that Parliament was able to work incredibly well in creating a hybrid system and adjusting to circumstances.

10. Evidence-gathering in context: the evolving role of select committees

Views about the role of select committees in general seems to be changing, which is having an impact on the role of evidence.

10.1. The political and scrutiny functions of committees

Select committees exist as the main mechanism to 'examine the expenditure, administration and policy' of government departments (see House of Commons Standing Orders). This can work in different ways, but this overarching goal is nicely summarised by this chair:

> I think it is the main forum in which the [government department] and ministers in the [department] are held to account by Parliament and I feel that is an important task and if we do it well we can improve the policies of [the department] and the experience of people who [are affected by its policies] (Interview with MP 19).

The importance of the committee system should not be understated, as this official points out:

> It's a very, very powerful thing to require the government of the day to write down its policy on any given subject that exists in very few other countries in the world and is itself a valuable contribution to scrutiny (Interview with Official 20).

The way that committees seek to conduct scrutiny can work in different ways. With respect to committee reports alone, one official described several different aims, including but not limited to:
-     Traditional or 'core' scrutiny work as suggested above;
-     An attempt at 'giant slaying' by holding powerful interests to account;
-     Getting voices heard or shed light on an issue;
-     Agenda setting to bring coherence to a debate; and,
-     Examine a past event to be the authoritative voices on what went wrong.

He goes on to say that some of these are not necessarily aimed at a government department, suggesting an evolution of the committee's roles due to their 'increased profile and ambition' (Interview with Official 20) (see also Mellows-Facer et al., 2019). Different interpretations of a committee's role will affect what evidence is heard and prioritised. For instance, 'giant slaying' requires high-profile oral evidence while agenda-setting will be interested in gathering more academic evidence to think deeply about an issue (Interview with Official 20).[9]

The scrutiny process is also a political process. Although this is a banal point, it reminds us that evidence is only one of several considerations that underpin committee work. It is precisely this which is the distinctive selling point for select committees, as this official explains:

> It is [MPs] who form or bring to the evidence the political insight and the political judgement that gives select committee products – which includes reports but are not confined to reports – essentially gives those scrutiny

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9   This echoes my previous research (Geddes, 2020), where I have argued that different interpretations of scrutiny fundamentally affect the direction of committee work.

products their value. It's what makes us different from a thinktank or an academic analysis (Interview with Official 8).

Committees depend on the members that sit on them, otherwise 'the value of us supporting select committees has really been lost' (Interview with Official 8).

Interviewees noted that scrutiny is important to 'press for change' (Interview with MP 18) in a less partisan, though no less political, environment. To achieve this environment, it requires substantive engagement with evidence. One official explains:

> Committee reports are authoritative generally if they tend to show balance. But they're products of a political process and not an academic process. And they are more authoritative if there is a balanced series of arguments (Interview with Official 5).

What this means is that evidence is a necessary but not sufficient part of the scrutiny process, which is in a complex relationship with politics and decision-making. Balance is important because it demonstrates engagement with different ideas rather than deliberations based on a partisan framework.

10.2. The informational function of committees

Although the traditional interpretations of the role of select committees is about scrutiny, there has also been an acceptance that committees play informational and learning roles. In my previous research, I have shown how MPs use select committees as a venue to learn about policy issues or to test out ideas that they would then go on to debate elsewhere in Parliament (Geddes, 2020, pp. 49–50, 143–145). This was also echoed in interviews for this project:

> Personally, they are a great way of becoming an expert in a particular field of interest and you get access to a huge amount of information and it gives you whether it is leverage or pulling power, in order to do research on your own (Interview with MP 14).

> It created the opportunity for individual MPs to develop their knowledge and understanding of a business, of a department, which was both of interest to individuals so it gives them a sense of greater involvement in helping to shape policy even though they are not members of the government, and it provides a body of knowledge in Parliament on the workings of individual departments, which is useful for Parliament as a whole (Interview with MP 12).

These are useful illustrative quotes that demonstrate the importance of gathering evidence as a link for policy learning.

This role for committees has implications for how they work. First, it means that they are an opportunity for MPs to specialise and to use the information that they have learnt in other settings. Multiple MPs explained how they would use evidence in debates of the main chamber, to contribute to discussions with APPGs, and more (e.g. Interview with MP 9). Second, it also means that simply putting information in the public domain that may otherwise be concealed or unknown is important. This can produce an evidence base through which MPs can subsequently build a narrative around a policy issue (Interview with MP 14). Third, and more cautionary, there is also a danger that committee members could conflate policy *scrutiny* with policy *learning*. This could lead to committee members being more passive recipients of information rather than pressing for action or clarity, and requires a careful balance.

10.3. The representational function of committees

Committees have also been identified as a site for supporting the representational and democratic functions of Parliament as a whole. Committees are perceived as more accessible and without the procedural complexity of other parts of Parliament; committees often look at issues directly interesting for the public; and it is easy to follow the narrative or discussion over time. The process is also open: anybody can write to a committee to submit written evidence (Interview with Official 18).

This representational role has also been noted by MPs. One says: 'we've been trying to see the select committee as a kind of important gateway for democratic participation in terms of parliamentary deliberation' (Interview with MP 17). Another:

> I know you can't do it all the time, but on certain evidence and certain sessions, I think you really should encourage the general public to share their experiences. So, I know it can be a tough task for the clerks, but I think sometimes we've really got to use this as a vehicle to promote transparency, openness and also inclusivity and bring people from the communities into Westminster (Interview with MP 11).

Other MPs also noted how they would attempt to use committee work to bring in perspectives from their constituency or their region of the UK (Interview with MP 7; Interview with MP 5; Interview with MP 8).

This has obvious implications for the way that committees gather and use evidence. It explains why there has been a growth in evidence from a 'lived experience' perspective and also partly explains the importance attached to having a diversity of witnesses from all around the UK and from different protected characteristics. And while in some respects this can be a positive development for supporting public engagement with politics, there are challenges. One official explains that engagement is 'not the same thing as scrutiny', and therefore limits the ability for committees to carry out their core functions (Interview with Official 3). Another official:

> I think this particular thing is really tricky […] When members of the public come in on an open house day, we say, "You can engage with Parliament by giving evidence". But we don't say to them, "Actually, that would be useless. It will be just a waste of your time and mine quite bluntly". But I'm not saying that we don't care what the everyman thinks, but I'm saying that isn't the avenue by which they should be encouraged to be engaging (Interview with Official 2).

This raises a further question over what evidence is gathered and how it is used, returning to some of the tensions identified in Section 6 about the role of lived experience as a form of evidence for committee work. This is not to say that select committees should not engage with the public; rather, that the current process designed with policy scrutiny of government in mind, especially written evidence and the increasing volumes of that evidence, may not necessarily be set up to also integrate public participation or to fulfil a democratic function of Parliament.

This section highlights some of the wider issues facing select committees and how their role is evolving. Committees do not play a narrow policy scrutiny function, but the design of the process only seems to have this function in mind, resulting in tensions with other roles that committees perform.

11. Conclusions

In this final section of the report, I want to bring together the main overarching themes.

What counts as evidence is an important place to start because it structures the contours of what is included and excluded. Interviewees generally thought of 'evidence' in terms of parliamentary evidence, i.e. written and oral evidence (Section 2). With respect to formal evidence-gathering, distinctive features can be summarised in the following way:
- Written evidence is seen as the foundation for inquiry processes and the main source of information. Anybody can submit, making it open. Written evidence is analysed and evaluated according to three dimensions: (i) the source (i.e. organisational affiliation) to understand the likely type of knowledge and identify authority; (ii) motivation for submitting evidence; (iii) the political/policy value of a submission.
- Oral evidence is where MPs directly engage with different types of knowledge and information. It is a site of favoured access in being invite-only. It may play an informational role or be used to probe claims made elsewhere. Oral evidence, given its engagement with members, is usually the preferred source of evidence for reports.

Increasingly, committees are also innovating with 'informal' activities. Some of these have been used for a long time, including committee visits and private roundtables; others have become more frequent in recent years, including social media, surveys and focus groups.

Three trends were also identified (Section 6, Section 7, Section 10):
- A growing role for lived experience and public opinion in written (and, though to a lesser extent, oral) evidence;
- An emphasis on diversity, not just in terms of political viewpoints (a long-standing tradition) but of witnesses' personal characteristics; and,
- A growing belief that select committees are not limited to providing scrutiny of government policy, but vehicles for public participation and as information-gathering tools.

Throughout interviews, participants raised several challenges, including:
- In general, there is growth in the volumes of evidence. In part, this is due to a growing role for lived experience and public opinion in written evidence, which has put pressures on committee teams;
- Sometimes it is not clear what principles underpin the value of 'lived experience', or how to best integrate it into existing committee processes and inquiries, putting further pressures on (i) the process and on staff, and (ii) on public expectations that may not be met;
- There is a tension in promoting diversity of witnesses in that it is seen as a normative good for some, but also difficult to achieve without adequate resources and agreement on whether this should be prioritised;
- Their evolving role means that committees are being asked to fulfil more tasks, including public engagement and diversity goals, putting further pressure on teams and evidence process;
- The process for gathering evidence has remained largely the same despite innovations, improved technological advances, and changing practices, which some believed needs to be addressed given new pressures, notably increased volume and new kinds of evidence;
- Time pressures are intense and constant, which is partly the result of the above trends but also a belief that committees are under-resourced, by both MPs and officials; and,
- The skillset and commitment of officials was praised, but, according to some officials, there is perceived lack of training around innovations of evidence-gathering and gathering/using quantitative data.

The main themes of this report have several implications for what 'good' evidence use looks like and possible suggestions for enhancing evidence use.

11.1. What does 'good' evidence use look like?

There are different ways that officials and MPs approach evidence. A key question that remains is to understand what 'good' analysis of evidence therefore looks like. Based on this research and the reflections from MPs and officials about how they undertake their analysis of evidence, I suggest the following principles:

1. Evidence needs to be appropriate for the inquiry, i.e. the committee needs to be clear about the purpose of gathering and using evidence (based on Section 5, Section 6 and Section 10).
2. Evidence needs to be gathered from a diversity of sources – not just in terms of political views, but also personal characteristics and geographical coverage across the UK (based on Section 2 and Section 7).
3. Evidence needs to be systematically analysed and given the time to do so, i.e. ensuring there is adequate resource to reflect on evidence (based on Section 3 and Section 8).
4. Evidence needs to be engaging for committee members, i.e. evidence-gathering cannot become a staff-only exercise but needs to be led by MPs (based on Section 3 and Section 7).

11.2. Enhancing evidence use by select committees

Based on the findings, there are several small- and medium-level changes that MPs and officials have suggested to enhance the role of evidence in select committee work. Although this fellowship was not intended to formally assess the evidence-gathering process, nor to identify proposals for reforming the committee system, I summarise suggestions in Table 11.1. Some of these echo recommendations from the House of Commons Liaison Committee's inquiry into committee effectiveness from 2019.

Table 11.1. Suggestions for enhancing evidence use by select committees

Suggestion	Rationale, justification and explanation	Source
Simplify terminology	To make parliamentary processes more accessible to a wider range of people and to clarify the meaning behind 'evidence' that otherwise masks what information can be useful	Section 2.1.
Collaborative assessment of evidence	One clerk suggested that there should always be two officials working on an inquiry to manage volumes and to discuss ideas. This could work in different ways, e.g. one lead and one supporting person. This will likely have planning and resource implications.	Section 6.3.
Transparency around diversity data	Committing to publishing more information about the diversity of witnesses could be a catalyst for further action around diversity	Section 7.
Monitoring 'new' submissions/ witnesses	Parliament could internally seek to monitor the proportion of new witnesses or organisations that have not engaged with Parliament previously as an indicator of outreach and bringing in new voices (e.g. online submission portal could have a tick box for 'have you submitted evidence before?')	Section 7.

Feedback from MPs after oral evidence	Some MPs and officials believed that further opportunities to discuss oral evidence would be beneficial. This will require each individual committee to introduce their own mechanisms to enhance feedback opportunities.	Section 3.2.
Identifying a toolkit or principles of good evidence use	Interviewees noted that it may be useful to have a toolkit to help identify good evidence use following this report. While I have made a start on this (see Section 11.1.), further depth and possible indicators can still be developed (e.g. in collaboration with POST and the House of Commons Library).	Section 11.1.
Investment in staff capacity, e.g. on data analysis but more generally	Across a range of areas of this report, time pressures and capacity issues were mentioned, such as time to identify diverse witnesses or deal with large volumes of evidence.	Section 7. Section 8.
Training to do more data analysis, how to use NVivo	Although staff skills were not raised as a particular issue, some believed that more could be done to enhance professional development and give further training opportunities, e.g. for NVivo.	Section 8.3.
Maintain good practice not to have weekly evidence sessions on the same inquiry	Due to time pressures on staff and not having enough capacity to analyse and write briefing papers, several staff suggested that good practice is to not hold evidence sessions on the same inquiry for two or more weeks; instead, inquiry managers would be given at least two weeks to analyse and prepare.	Section 8.1.
Review or re-think written evidence	Given the volume of evidence that select committees are now receiving, some have suggested that select committees should think about how to gather evidence differently or more efficiently.	Section 3.1.; Section 5. Section 10.
Allowing evidence to be received in different formats	At the moment, evidence can only be submitted in a Word document or PDF. Several interviewees (and the Liaison Committee previously) suggested the introduction of reforms (in terms of procedure and/or technology) to allow other formats of evidence, e.g. video evidence, to be submitted through the online portal.	Section 3.1.; Section 6.3.
More frequent committee hearings outside of Westminster	Admittedly only explicitly mentioned by one MP, he suggested that evidence sessions should take place in different communities, rather than always in Westminster. This could allow for greater public engagement without necessarily affecting the process of evidence-gathering too much. This is in addition to general committee visits (uniformly praised by MPs).	Section 5.
Identifying principles for using 'lived experience' in committees	Although lived experience has grown in importance and there is SCT guidance, officials are sometimes unsure what principles underpin its use in Parliament, and suggested more clarity.	Section 6.3.

| Maintain the ability for witnesses to appear in committee hearings digitally | Almost all MPs and officials noted that one positive side-effect of Covid-19 was greater diversity of witnesses because physical barriers and time barriers had been removed. Many believed that in-person sessions were still better, but argued it was a fair compromise to allow witnesses to appear digitally if this ensures more diversity and better evidence overall. | Section 9. |

11.3. Identifying 'pillars' of evidence

All of the suggestions in the above table seek to alleviate a recurring theme: how to ensure that *processes* for gathering evidence keep pace with the *practices* of evidence use. The basic process of a select committee inquiry has remained unchanged for a very long time; one official said that an MP from the nineteenth century would recognise them today (Interview with MP 5). Innovations that have taken place are usually reactive, such as virtual participation of witnesses following Covid-19, and mostly have been undertaken within the contours of the existing system. The call for greater diversity and inclusion has been taken more seriously, submitting evidence has become easier through the Internet, and committees acknowledge the importance of 'lived experience' as a form of knowledge. But all of these trends are taking place within the standard committee processes, which are arguably only just being accommodated.

Although interviewees did not, on the whole, suggest that the process needs to be significantly altered, I believe there are underlying tensions. This leads me to propose a more provocative view of evidence that could address several of the issues raised in this report. This is to re-frame evidence-gathering not as a *process* but in terms of three *evidence pillars*, each of which are formally recognised as a form of evidence in Parliament. The first pillar, *submissions of information*, is similar to the current 'written evidence' system, but would include more differentiation in a revised online portal that asks individuals/ organisations submitting their evidence to identify the basis for their evidence (e.g. as an individual, as a university academic, etc.). The second pillar, *committee hearings*, would remain largely unchanged even if the terminology would shift away from 'oral evidence' to make it more accessible (in line with changing practice). Finally, the third pillar, *consultation and engagement*, would formally institutionalise so-called 'informal activities' as an accepted and valid form of evidence. This third pillar would include the option for rigorous surveys, focus groups and roundtables, as well as committee visits and submissions from individuals that are sharing their personal lived experience, which would not necessarily have to be a Word document but could include any format, such as video. The assumption would be that only an anonymised summary of the activity/information would be published as a formal record/proceeding, and that these activities would be supported by a strong, methodologically-trained group of staff.

This approach to re-framing evidence by select committees may not be possible, but it arguably reflects practice in terms of what is already happening (as one interviewee pointed out, the ideal linear process – moving from a terms of reference to written evidence to oral evidence to report isn't reality anymore (Interview with Official 9); in fact, one senior official didn't recognise evidence-gathering as a linear process at all (personal communication by email, autumn 2022). My hope is that re-thinking evidence in terms of pillars may help push forward discussion about some of the challenges raised throughout this report and the core conclusion of my analysis that practices are pushing at the limits of the existing design of inquiry processes.

11.4. Implications for effective scrutiny

Based on this project, it may be possible to identify specific metrics or indicators for frameworks to evaluate effective scrutiny. This is difficult to establish in general terms given the distinctive nature of each committee inquiry and committee membership (Interview with Official 3; Interview with Official 20). Nevertheless, some suggestions that the SCT may wish to consider:
- Strengthening data collection around evidence diversity (in terms of personal characteristics, type of organisation, geographical location, etc.).
- Identifying what proportion of the written/oral evidence is new (i.e. individual/organisation has never submitted evidence before), suggesting ability to go beyond 'usual suspects'.
- Identifying what proportion of a briefing was used to structure committee hearings (e.g. particular sections, not how many questions were asked/read out), indicating member engagement with briefings and trust of members in briefing material.
- Examining how many follow-up questions were asked in committee hearings to indicate member engagement with the hearings and the briefing material.
- Qualitative assessments through surveys of committee teams that examines the differences/ similarities of view before and after an inquiry, or to identify objectives for evidence-gathering.
- Proportion of evidence that is cited in a final report, indicating (i) the value of a specific piece of evidence or testimony and (ii) the diversity not just of evidence *received* but also its *use*.

There are very clear risks with these indicators: they are resource-intensive, require new processes, and offer only partial insights about effective evidence use. Some may be better suited for academic investigation than monitoring internally. Nevertheless, they may offer starting points for discussion.

11.5. Limitations and future research

This report is not without its limits:
1. In being only based on 50 interviews (out of 650 MPs and around 300 SCT staff), there are a lot of people with views that were not consulted. A more comprehensive project that examines the views of MPs and officials could offer more nuanced perspectives on how well the system is working. Furthermore, the views of stakeholders, i.e. those submitting written evidence or participating in oral evidence, could have been included.
2. Although I worked directly for a select committee for more than four months as part of this research, it was not possible to make use of observations as part of the analysis due to limited access and consent. Fieldwork experiences broadly inform my account, but much more could be done to make use of case studies and examples to tease out some of the key issues raised in this report to add depth to existing research.
3. There is a significant amount of further data that could be collected and analysed, including the way that questions are asked/answered in oral evidence, the prevalence of suggested lines of questioning from briefs in oral evidence, a quantitative analysis of evidence submitted to committees, etc. This could give much greater insight into the activities of select committees and their use of evidence.

While these limitations do not take away from the broad conclusions in this report, they suggest lots of further research is possible.

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Appendix A: Interviews

Identifying interviewees

MPs were initially identified by committee membership, focusing on those committees with an environmental remit (or similar), which I subsequently broadened out to include other domestic policy issues. Meanwhile, parliamentary staff were invited based on their position as either clerk or specialist, and identified through snowballing and interactions at Tothill Street.

As the process for interviews took place, I was mindful of the diversity of participants, especially the party split of MPs. I tried to correct this by inviting a disproportionate number of Conservative MPs to achieve the same balance as the House overall, but this was only partially successful due to a high number of non-responses (or rejections). There is an inevitable bias: those MPs that responded positively are likely to be interested and active in select committee work.

Undertaking interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and focused on three key themes:
1. Roles and definitions of evidence, and approaches to analysis;
2. The role of written and oral evidence, and briefing papers for select committees; and,
3. Broader questions about evidence use, including recommendations for improvements.

The interview checklist and schedules evolved over time, and some interviews departed from the three main themes.

All interviews took place on the assumption of anonymity and with informed (and predominantly written) consent. Almost all interviews were recorded and took place during the fellowship period, in-person or online.

Using interview data

All recorded interviews were transcribed (by a confidential academic transcription service), and analysed in NVivo.

I refer to interviewees as, 'Interview with [X] [Y]', where X is either 'MP' or 'official' and Y is a randomly generated number. For this report, I do not distinguish between clerks, management, specialists, secondees, etc., though in some cases further information is added for context. Similarly, I only talk of MPs, though (if relevant) I will identify if the interviewee is a chair or not. Direct quotes are almost verbatim; in some cases, I have tidied up language for readability purposes or to correct linguistic inconsistencies in speech (e.g. removing 'you know' or adding 'with' or 'the' if omitted, etc).